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ABSTRACT

The University of Southwestern Louisiana offers an English major in technical writing. Many assignments and topics are covered in the junior technical writing course, but one of the most effective projects combines the students' and the professor's expertise and focuses on writing for a specific audience. The technical writer's job is to know how to communicate with and obtain information from various technicians, and at the same time be familiar with a variety of audiences so that he will be able to translate technicians' information into information comprehensible by the audience. To develop an awareness of their audience, students go through a two-stage process during several weeks of the course: a rhetorical analysis of their own writing, with a report; and a translation of a technical article. This two-stage project usually takes students from four to five weeks to complete. Upon completion, students have gained a sense of audience, enabling them to communicate an idea in any style. It is a sense of audience that makes technical writers the "informational liaisons" for all fields. (DF)

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Go Out and Prosper, Technocrats:

Technical Writers and Rhetorical Translations

Carmen Cramer

The University of Southwestern Louisiana now has a Technical Writing English Major (matched with co-lateral majors in Physics, Engineering, Math, Chemistry, Computer Science, and Biology). The first Technical Writing course, on the junior level, years ago began as a course in writing a science term paper. Since, the course has had to evolve. With a lot of professional advice, especially from IBM documentation writers, the focus of the course has become the form and style of professional writing. Fairly simple, right?

Simple--except that we who teach it know writing rather than technology. Many assignments and many topics are covered in the junior course of Technical Writing at USL, but one of the most effective projects combines the students' expertise and the professor's. That is a project based on writing for a specific audience.

Logically, an IBM manual for programmers of a new product sounds different than the users' manual for that product. The Tech writer's job is to know how to talk to get information from various technicians, and to know various audiences well enough to be able to translate technicians' information into audience information.

Juniors who major in electrical engineering (not to mention English majors) have no idea how much they already know in their

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field. To learn audience communication, they have to realize a great deal about levels of language, both diction and style, far beyond the language that they hear and write in their circles of technical friends.

To let these students apprehend the stylistics of audience, a teacher goes through a two stage process during several weeks of a Tech Writing course: first, a rhetorical analysis and report; secondly, a translation of a technical article.

Using a report that they have written earlier based on a questionnaire, the students do individual rhetorical analyses of their own writing. They use a simple chart like the one below:

sen-tence no.	no.of words in sen-tence	list verbs and verbals	main verbs: active or pas-sive	sen-tence type: s., cmpx., cmpd., loose	clause pattern	copy and name sen-tence opener	list any special tech-niques

The students go through the first twenty or so sentences of a report that they have written, identifying for each sentence the things listed at the top of the chart. (This provides a quick grammar review as well--but that is not the primary purpose.) Once this sheet is complete, the students do correlations. For instance, they correlate the number of words per sentence to the

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number of verbs and verbals--to compare their ratio to an arbitrary ideal of six to one. They find the average number of words per sentence and the spread of sentence length (longest compared to shortest), and they compare these to the average and to the spread of authors, from Hemingway to Faulkner, to anonymous authors of annual reports and technical manuals, both those that they do and do not like. Here the professor points out stylistic tricks such as the short emphatic sentence between longer sentences, unattractive information hidden in dependent clauses, and the simplicity of sentence variety to break a monotonous tone.

They analyze verbs, especially the ratio of passive verbs to active. Also they note the number of -to be verbs, in order to find ways to create more concise, more precise sentence structures. And with "special techniques," the students notice cliches, realizing that "It is greatly appreciated that. . . ." makes each student sound like every other student, something they want no part of. Another special technique is parallelism, of primary necessity for any tech writer to have as second nature because of the formatting requirements of the field.

The students make various correlations, develop ideal standards, and plot plans of action for their writing style, all culminating in a report which delineates the proposed changes of style that they want. The catch to this report is that it must be written in the style which the report describes--a short but demanding exercise. This rhetorical analysis report is the end

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of phase one of the project.

To re-emphasize all of this new knowledge about stylistics, and to re-focus the new knowledge toward writing for specific audiences, the Tech Writing students next have as an assignment the translation of a technical article. First they compile a list in the library of professional journals in their field. Surprisingly, many of the students do not know of the proliferation of technical and professional communication that takes place after college by means of these sources.

Within one of these journals, each student locates one article, from eight to ten pages long, which is on the far edge of the student's understanding. All of the students must push, read and re-read their articles to grasp the article's information, learning in their fields as well as in English.

An example is this exerpt from a Harvard Business Review article, "An Unmanaged Computer System Can Stop You Dead" (Nov-Dec 1983):

> This should be the best of times for computer departments: installed capacity in the United States is increasing at better than 30% per year, and even more in the largest and most advanced companies. Demand for new applications is rising still faster. Pressures for increased productivity in manufacturing, distribution, services, and especially the office, together with renewed emphasis on improved quality for American products, can only mean greater reliance on

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> computing organizations in the future. Indeed, the overall picture would appear to be a marketer's dream: huge backlogs; heightened demand; constantly more efficient computers; the promise of new technology for the office, the plant, and probably the home; and an inflation rate that enables companies to justify more and more applicatons.

Actually this article is a simple one, written for lay people who come in contact with computers, a relatively well written article. But it will do for illustration. However, imagine also articles in such fields as physics and engineering.

The students first define the audience of their articles. They review the diction, the buzz words, and distinguish between the jargon and the necessary technical vocabulary in the article. They analyze the stylistics and the organization, using their rhetorical skills.

Then the project begins. The students redefine the audience. That new audience is the Technical Writing instructor, quite a change from the audience of most professional and technical journals. They have to focus on the instructor's intellectual capabilities--usually quite high--and technical expertise--usually quite low--so that they will know what they have to say and how to say it in order to make their new audience understand the article.

They begin a translation of their articles. First they redefine the organization, reducing the formal repetition of the

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parts of the report, relying on the body primarily, instead of the abstract, the graphs, the introduction and conclusion. Another element of organizational redefinition is identifying the parts which will need to be enlarged with explanation of the underlying concepts, since their alternate audience may not have the necessary background to accept some of the premises of the paper. Some part may be tagged to be left out, if it is superfluous information for the paper's thesis. Also, they identify some organizational principle that they want to follow: spatial, most important to least important or vice versa, chronological, theory to application or vice versa--any of the normal patterns, none of which the original article may follow. Again, these decisions are made with the audience in mind.

Next, the students underline any word or phrase in the article that they cannot with certainty say that the new audience will understand. In the exerpt above, there are a few words that the student underlined: "installed capacity," "new applications," "computing organizations." However, further on in the Harvard Business Review article, she was overwhelmed by the language she noted as jargon:

> Organizational design
>
> The first strategic planning question for information resources is how the system should be organized. Top managers must decide how many large or host data centers there should be and to whom they should report. Senior managers must also determine how

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> the development groups should be organized, how many there should be, and where they should be located within the business. Another consideration is what role the corporate information department will play, vis-a-vis divisional or regional departments. Other questions for top executives to discuss include: (1) should computing be brought together with office systems and communications? If so, in what type of structure? (2) should planning for DP be separate from development and operations planning? And (3) how should the traditional data processing and basic business systems be organized relative to information-reporting systems and decision-support activities?

All of those underlined words are used in the article as if they are normal words; some of them are "normal," but their contextual meaning is sheer jargon for a layperson, especially for a Tech Writing instructor.

The students learn the means of explanation available for them to use on technical terms: definition, example, analogy, repetitive use of a word or phrase in context, synonym use, and appositives. For each term, they choose either to replace it with more common diction or to explain it to the reader in one of these ways.

Style and diction are relatively easy for them to revise after having performed the rhetorical analysis. They pick up

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awkward sentences and know how to simplify or rephrase such things:

> In spite of these glowing prospects, many businesses today face problems in their use of our wonderful technology so serious that they threaten to jeopardize the bright future not only of many computer professionals but also of the companies that employ them.

This sentence from the "Stop You Dead" article turned into this one, when the student "translated" it:

> Business prospects look good, but technology threatens those prospects; unmanaged technology jeopardizes everyone's job in large corporations.

The students pick out main points and know how to syntactically emphasize them. They develop natural rhythms of prose. And them. have radar that catches over-formal structures, cliches, and passive voice verbs.

At this point, the students have restructured their articles, explained background information, altered the diction, phrasing, and tone, all to match the same thesis with a new audience. All that is left, then, is for them to construct an abstract, add in headings, graphs, and diagrams, and they have an article translated from one audience to another. More importantly, they have working knowledge of both audiences' needs.

During this translation stage of the project, they see many

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overhead projections of their own attempts at altering information style, so they become more and more adept at picking up tonal differences in their classmates' writing, and eventually in their own. A small example of the final product, one that did not require too much hard-core translation, but a great deal of tonal change, demonstrates their abilities:

> Organizational design
>
> Every company is unique in many ways. Therefore, computer systems must also be unique in order to provide the best service. The variety of choices available confuse most managers. Numerous questions bombard the senior managers. How many data centers should we have? Who should provide the data? Where should we put these centers? Who should develop programs? Should we combine the computing process with office systems? with communicaton? Should we combine data processing with program development? Any one answer could dramatically change the effectiveness of the computer system. Before answering these questions, managers must determine the responsibility of each participant in the information system. Each must have his own statement of mission and responsibility.

This two stage project, the rhetorical analysis and the translation, usually takes students four to five weeks to complete. And they learn everything from editing skills to parallelism, from a sense of their own intellignece in their

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technical field to a sense of other people's interest in their field. They learn all this by doing it instead of by listening to lectures. In other words, these Technical Writing students gain a sense of audience, from which writers can communicate an idea in any style, whatever is appropriate to the situation. It is a sense that lets writers translate the words of the manager into words for the scientist, or vice-versa. It is a sense of audience that makes Technical Writers the informational liaisons for all fields.

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